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**Title:**                                **Disrupting the ‘ravages of lookism’: Observations of female model bodies**

**Abstract**

This paper seeks to disrupt one of the feminist orthodoxies about the riskiness of looking concertedly at women’s bodies. Drawing on observational research that intentionally and meticulously ‘looked at’ the female body, the paper considers how this observational work is *disruptive* in that it challenges the notion that to look scrupulously at female bodies feeds into and inflames an already burgeoning culture of ‘lookism’ (Katzman, 1997). As part of a doctoral study that reconceptualises the fashion model as a pedagogue to young girls, observations were conducted in a modelling ‘classroom’ in order to document how young girls are instructed by the female model body in a pedagogical manner. This research situates the bodies of the fashion model and the young girl as ‘objects’ of a punctilious ‘gaze’ that destabilises more conventional ideas about doing observational research ‘properly’. This paper will explore the implications of this work with particular emphasis on what it means to look intently at female bodies in general, and more specifically the female model body as a body of ‘danger’, and the young female body as a body of ‘innocence’.

## **Disrupting the ‘ravages of lookism’:<sup>i</sup>**

### **Observations of female model bodies**

#### **Introduction**

This paper seeks to enter a ‘risky terrain’ (Popkewitz, 1998: 7) in order to *disrupt* certain conventional notions about looking resolutely at the female body. Given the feminist suggestion that not only men but also women should ‘look away’ from female bodies in order to facilitate women’s emancipation,<sup>ii</sup> this paper unsettles the more accepted ‘rules’ which prescribe how we ought to ‘look at’ the female body, if at all. The task of this paper, then, is not to ‘subvert’ or ‘invert’ the gaze, as other feminist writers have attempted to do, but rather to literally ‘*rupture* – of interruption and disruption – in the (uncertain) hope that this will generate possibilities for things to happen that are closed off’ (Stronach and MacLure, 1997: 5). More specifically, it aims to unsettle how we have come to know ‘looking at’ the female body ‘properly’ particularly in the context of looking intently at female bodies in observation research.

For this purpose, the paper draws on observational research conducted as part of a doctoral study that reconceptualised the fashion model as a pedagogue to young girls, as an example of research that positioned the female bodies of the fashion model and the young girl as ‘objects’ of a scrupulous ‘gaze’. This paper will examine how such a gaze destabilises more accepted ideas about the ‘proper’ conduct of observational

research and the implications that this research has by embarking on three tasks. Firstly, the paper will explore how looking intently at female bodies in observation research signifies a departure from orthodox feminist discourse that emphasises the inappropriateness of doing this. It will then briefly consider the risks implicated in the practice of looking fastidiously at the female model body in observation research given that this female body is predominantly characterised as a body of ‘danger’ in medical, psychological and media literature. Finally, the paper will discuss the threat posed by looking attentively at young girls in observation research and how, particularly in psychological literature, such a look is thought to corrupt these bodies of female ‘innocence’.

### **Disrupting observations: ‘looking at’ female model bodies in empirical work**

The research that this paper is informed by takes the female bodies of the fashion model and the young girl to be the focus or ‘matter’ (Butler, 1993) of empirical work and, more specifically observational work. As is stated above, the aim of the research was to reconceptualise the relationship between the fashion model and the young girl as a pedagogical encounter in which knowledge is transmitted body-to-body and female-to-female. The research argued that it may be useful to re-think the fashion model as a pedagogue that instructs knowledge about ‘ideal’ feminine bodily conduct to the young girl. Moreover, it suggested the young girl, as an attentive ‘apprentice’ comes to know things about the model body by ‘gazing at’ it as a pedagogical ‘spectacle’ of knowledge.

What emerged from this reconceptualisation of the model-girl relationship was the importance of a methodological approach that not only ‘re-membered’ (Shapiro, 1994)

the body as a powerful pedagogical knowledge object but also as a ‘sight/site’ (Angel, 1994) of empirical production and practice. In order to document what sort of knowledge was being transmitted and the ‘learning outcomes’<sup>iii</sup> this knowledge transfer produces for the young girl, the empirical work paid scrupulous ‘attention to the body, literally and figuratively’ (Pillow, 2003: 145). This was particularly the case with the observational work, as it sought to document the precise movements of the bodies of models and girls in the modelling ‘classroom’ as they produced their encounter as embodied pedagogy.

On the surface, this type of observational work may be considered typical, in the sense of a researcher carefully documenting the movements of participants in the field. However, that the gaze of the researcher was intensively ‘looking at’ *female* bodies and, even more problematical, female *model* bodies and *young* female bodies, situates this observation work as un-usual. For example, this observation work appears to work against-the-grain of what some feminist writers consider the ‘proper’ way to look at the female body. These issues will be explored further in this paper.

#### **‘Shells’ and ‘sex objects’:<sup>iv</sup> Feminist tensions about looking at female bodies**

*Men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object – and most particularly an object of vision: a sight (Berger, 1972: 47, italics in original).*

This now oft cited passage from Peter Berger (1972) illustrates an issue that has concerned feminist writers for some time: ‘looking *at*’ the female body and, hence, rendering it ‘an object’. Feminist writers have highlighted the riskiness implicated in

looking concertedly at women's bodies given the possible danger of causing these bodies (and the 'identities' or 'selves' of women) to become 'objectified'. Laura Mulvey (1999) particularly explores the danger of gazing at the female body in her discussion of the gaze in film. Mulvey suggests that the gaze in film is male and that the female body is located in a position of 'to-be-looked-at-ness'. From this position as an 'erotic object', women are disempowered as the male gaze disallows space for a female gaze: women are available only to be 'looked at', not to look. For Mulvey, then, the female body that is looked at is a body (and a woman) dominated and in need of liberation.

Another peril that feminist writers highlight involves how making this body an object of the gaze risks inflaming 'the ravages of ... lookism' (Katzman, 1997: 71) and, hence, rendering the female body one-dimensional, devoid of depth or substance. To situate the female body as 'an object of vision' is to consider this body crudely in terms of its 'artificiality' (Kilbourne, 1995: 122). In fact, Rosalind Coward (2000: 39) suggests that 'damage' is caused by women 'looking at themselves and images of other women' and that this makes women the objects of 'control ... effected through the scrutiny of women by visual ideals'. The riskiest aspect of doing this arises out of how, in making the female body one-dimensional, so too the woman's identity or self is 'dehumanised'. Jean Kilbourne (1995: 122) suggests that this can have far reaching consequences for women who learn to view their own bodies as objects, 'as *things* separate from and more important than her real self'.

Clearly, feminist writers emphasise 'looking away' from female bodies lest they be 'objectified' and stripped of their substance. Given these feminist orthodoxies, the

observation research examined in this paper appears to present as a breach of feminist ideas that emphasise the ‘improperness’ of situating the female body as an object to be ‘looked at’. What makes these observations even more problematic is that they also involved looking meticulously at the body of the fashion model, considered in a burgeoning body of literature as a body of ‘danger’.

### **Flirting with ‘danger’: Looking at noxious female model bodies**

To visually scrutinize the female model body emerges as an increasingly ‘risky’ move considering the escalating vociferous cautions arising from medical and psychological researchers and media commentators. These bodies of research appear to insist on the nature of the female model body as inherently disorderly. In media commentary in particular, this body is seen to exemplify unhealthy, even dangerous forms of embodiment, a monstrously pathological being usually linked with the bodily pathology of the anorexic:

Forehead taut as though gripped by a medieval torture instrument. Cavities where her cheeks ought to be. A chin like the blade of a hatchet. Stringy neck and bony arms. Wafer breasts. Not enough belly to digest lunch. Not enough lap to hold a cat. Legs like the shafts of golf clubs. Feet – or at any rate shoes – you could slide through a mail slot (Erwin, 1998: 30).

Here, the female model body represents the archetypal thin and, hence, sick fashion model body in need of medical intervention. These understandings of the female model body are carried over into medical and psychological literature which devotes much research to literally measuring this body.<sup>v</sup> Wiseman *et al* (1992: 88) for example measured a sample of female model bodies limb by limb and found that they had become ‘thinner’, concluding that the physical proportions of this body were ‘dangerously unhealthy’ (89).

It is this female model body, as a body of 'unwell-ness' that medical and psychological researchers imbue with the capacity to 'infect' and 'disorder' healthy individuals in Western cultures. The specific focus of this literature is the relationship that the 'vulnerable' young girl has with the female model body and how this body represents a 'threat' to the health and safety of young female bodies. Medical and psychological researchers work to determine how the model body influences young girls by 'testing' girls with different measures after 'exposing' (Crouch & Degelman, 1998) young girls to images of fashion model bodies. Researchers argue that 'exposure' to these images causes young girls to compare themselves with these models and usually 'they come up short in those comparisons' (Botta, 1999: 37).

Cautions arising out of this research suggest that such comparisons can have serious consequences for young girls, particularly in terms of self-esteem and body image: 'the more they strive to be thin, the more they dislike their bodies, and the more they engage in unhealthy eating behaviours' (Botta, 1999: 37). As these consequences appear to be produced through having the young girl look at the female model body, researchers offer up intervention strategies that emphasise the need to 'look away' from the model body as a body of 'danger'. This notion is particularly emphasised in a suggestion by Hamilton and Waller (1993) who advise clinicians to recommend that their young female patients avoid reading fashion magazines altogether. What becomes apparent, then, is that medical and psychological researchers and media commentators lay emphasis on the need to look away from the female model body. Another female body that commentators urge the need to look away from is the body of the young girl.



### **Corrupting ‘innocent’ bodies: looking at the bodies of young girls**

Multiplicities of dangers are made apparent in the practice of looking concertedly at the bodies of ‘innocent’ young girls according to medical and psychological researchers. Indeed, this practice emerges as infinitely problematic given the concerns emerging from this literature that underscores the need to ‘protect’ the innocent young girl. In psychological commentary in particular, researchers examine the world of the young girl as something that needs to be ‘sanitised’ from the corrupting world of adulthood if the psychological health and wellbeing of the young girl is to be adequately protected. Valerie Walkerdine (1998: 257) notes that popular culture is discussed extensively ‘in so far as it presents the intrusion of adult sexuality into the sanitized space of childhood’. This, Walkerdine suggests is what psychological commentators understand to be ‘very harmful’ for young girls.

The foremost ‘threat’ associated with looking attentively at the young female body discussed in this research is the danger of transforming ‘children into the objects of voyeuristic adult desire’ (Giroux, 1998: 276). The practice of looking at the young female body is loaded with the risk of collapsing into voyeurism and, hence, provoking ‘hidden paedophilic desires in the viewer’ (Lumby, 1998: 48). Moreover, individuals that do look assiduously at the young female body risk being aligned with sexual deviancy. The consequence of most significance for psychological researchers, however, is the notion that to look at the young female body puts the young girls themselves at ‘psychic risk’ (Kilbourne, 1986: 45). The work of Emilce Dio Bleichmar (1995: 337), for example contends that a range of harmful effects may result from looking at the young female body, one of these being the young girl

experiences ‘a constant feeling of being looked at’ and, as such, the young girl comes to recognise that ‘what is visible to the eye constitutes the core of her identity’. In a time where ‘the biggest threat to children is to be found in the child molesters, paedophiles, abductors, and other who prey on children in the most obscene ways imaginable’ (Giroux, 1998: 267), then, the notion of looking conscientiously at the bodies of young girls presents as most certainly improper if not completely unreasonable.

## **Conclusion**

In a number of ways, the observation research discussed in this paper appears to disrupt the more taken for granted ways which we have come to know the female body as being ‘looked at’. Whilst shifting the focus onto the body as a research ‘site/sight’ is certainly not new, by looking concertededly at the female body, this paper has worked towards destabilising certain implicit rules that stipulate how best to ‘look at’ this body as an object of research. Such work may allow a shift away from more ‘traditional’ (Popkewitz, 1998) ways of doing observation research that work out of ‘an unfeeling, avoidant awareness of the matter and sense of the body’ (Casey, 2000: 53). More importantly, the paper may open up new possibilities and positions from which to re-interrogate the female body, the dangerous female model body and the innocent young female body as ‘looked at’ objects of research. The paper specifically points up the peculiarity of ‘looking-at’ as opposed to ‘looking-away’ from the female body in the hope that it may highlight certain slippages between ‘proper’ and ‘improper’ research practices.

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### Footnotes

<sup>i</sup> (Katzman, 1997: 122)

<sup>ii</sup> Andrea Dworkin (1974: 116) offers up a path to women's liberation which suggests the usefulness of 'looking away' from their bodies lest they become slaves to their bodies in the form of feminine bodily work: 'The body must be freed, liberated, quite literally: from paint and girdles and all varieties of crap'.

<sup>iii</sup> It is important to note that the research employed the phrase 'learning outcomes' in an ironic way, referring to outcomes of training in an embodied discipline in a Foucaultian (1977) sense rather than to students' social, emotional and psychological growth.

<sup>iv</sup> (Kilbourne, 1995: 122)

<sup>v</sup> Minna Rintala and Pertti Mustajoki (1992: 1576) produced an infamous account of the female model body as disorderly in their anthropometric measurement of body fat on shop mannequins, which are incidentally modelled on the bodies of live fashion models. They found that women 'with the shape of a modern mannequin would probably not menstruate' which, they conclude, 'is not without dangers'.